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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses some of the general issues of international cooperation within the context of distance education. Examples of the types of international cooperation are introduced in order to explain some of the pitfalls that can occur when coordinating organizations on an international level. Extensive discussion is undertaken concerning international cooperation at the multilateral level to point out how the features of distance education can effectively benefit larger units of people and accelerate development through collaborative ventures, including arrangements involving aid agencies and developing countries or arrangements among nation states. It is concluded that, although economic factors, political influences, and a host of other mediating factors may directly affect the basis for cooperation at the international level (North-North, South-South, or North-South arrangements), the potential outcomes of such cooperation include an improved lifestyle for distance education students, increased literacy, and the encouragement of rapid growth and development in many developing countries. (8 references) (DB)

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***International cooperation in distance education. Paper presented by Magnus John at a Distance Education Workshop held at the Centre for Educational Technology, University of Zimbabwe, in Harare 9-11 October 1991***

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## Introduction

This paper addresses some of the general issues of international cooperation prior to discussing how these stand up within the context of distance education. Examples of the types of international cooperation are introduced in order to explain some of the pitfalls associated with it. Extensive discussion is undertaken in the context of international cooperation at the multilateral level to point out how the features of the distance teaching mode can effectively benefit larger units of people, and accelerate development in North-South and South-South collaborative ventures.

While the concept of international cooperation may have a long period of history associated with it (in politics and trade, in particular), that of distance education has a much shorter life-span. Even where there might be some discrepancy regarding when distance education (1) is reputed to have begun, its production process (2) is one which thrives because of the way it lends itself to co-operative/collaborative enterprise. The more sophisticated the learning package is the greater the level of co-operation involved, it seems. Some course teams comprise academics, editors, librarians, educational technologists, designers, producers and others whose objective is a shared goal to develop multi-media teaching packages for their students. Some institutions develop only basic materials, in which case the level of co-operation may be less but is still in evidence, nevertheless.

Given the framework in which distance education practice operates there is much in it which, on reflection, has taken the concept of cooperation/collaboration to a revolutionary plane in higher education, particularly in the Western world. (In a modest way, too, developing countries may be said to be following apace, even if the overall effect appears to be slow.) The practice, for example, of credit transfer may have been in existence in United States institutions of higher education for a while, but the United Kingdom Open University, having now gained legitimacy and respect among colleagues and institutions within its national boundaries has, even if not directly responsible, been instrumental in quickening the pace of change in higher education in the United Kingdom. The possibility of introducing a modular system of degree courses in British universities, which should enable students to gain greater mobility and access within the British university system in order to pursue courses they wish to follow for their degree programme, is now being discussed. (3)

Distance education, it seems to me has, through its credit system, made the modular system of education popular and effective enough for it to gain

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currency. Furthermore, the shift of emphasis in distance and open learning to developing courses which are student-centred has also bolstered the importance of students as clients in the production process in education. The outcome has been a concern for quality materials and increased student support- neither of which provision can be achieved without an additional increase in the level of cooperation, either in terms of human or technological resources. The spirit of cooperation in distance education is, therefore, elevated to a plane which, hitherto, was beyond the realms of international cooperation within education. Through distance education, the parameters are continuously being expanded and international co-operation in distance education is breaking new ground in several ways.

**Why cooperate in distance education at the international level?**

International cooperation takes several forms and may stem from one of a number of reasons. However, two basic types of international cooperation exist: bilateral and multi-lateral cooperation between and among nation states. The provenance of the contact could be at any level (political, educational (institutional), social), but the impact of a successful cooperative venture has the capacity to create an end product which is much larger than the sum of the individual contribution of each of the participants.

This kind of outcome is at the core of successful examples of international co-operation of any kind, particularly at the multi-lateral level, in so far as it often links political, economic, educational and development factors in a single process. International cooperation at this scale can be a North-North or South-South arrangement, or even a North-South arrangement. In distance education, there are several examples of this:

North - North: EADTU, EDEN, ERASMUS, SATURN

South - South: SADCC, NEIDA, AADE

South - North: COL, ICDL, ICDE, ACCT, AMREF, UNESCO, INADES and bilateral arrangements involving aid agencies and developing countries.

The bases for cooperation at the international level may stem from one of a combination of motives: political, economic, altruistic, educational, idealistic, all of which are factors which may be inherent independently or together in bilateral or multilateral cooperation. The basic human characteristic to provide assistance in developing/strengthening structures may bring political or economic factors into play on a North-South basis. A good many collaborative ventures of this kind are of a bilateral nature, often small and for a limited period. Here, the bilateral examples between aid agencies (USAID, ODA, SIDA, CIDA, etc.) and nation states, particularly in developing countries, will fall into this category. With the contact usually at the political level, the partnership arrangement is often one where transfer of skills and expertise is undertaken over a fixed period. Two cases in point are the Kenya Language Arts Programme (USAID) and the Ivory Coast School Television Project (4, 5). The latter eventually had a consortium of funding agents involved but lack of local political and financial commitment at the end of international funding meant the end of the programme.

Within the context of idealism, combined with politics and economics, is to be found the multilateral level of international cooperation, under which category falls COL, ICDL, UNESCO, AMREF, INADES, SADCC, AADE. The matrix of the arrangement is often complex and depends on a number of factors: number of participants, the need/requirements of each, main objectives of the central body allocated the responsibility of administration, financial contribution, skills available within the organisation. The list can be endless!

Given the complexity of the cultural, legal, political and economic framework affecting the status of a multilateral collaborative venture, considerations of procedures and objectives are best allocated to a central administrative body capable of dealing with the ramifications of the implementation of its objectives. Known organisations in this category with the responsibility to fulfill such tasks include: ACCT, COL, ICDL. In the South-South context of the SADCC region, the level of importance of the factors involved may vary, particularly in the cultural context where affinity is stronger and common needs easily identifiable. That is not to say that the organisation becomes less complex to administer as a result.

An essential ingredient for the successful management of a distance teaching institution is when it benefits from a large student population in order to achieve economies of scale (6). Cooperation of a multilateral nature, successfully managed, especially when a large number of participants can pool resources for training (AAOU), can share their respective institutional materials and administrative information (COL, ICDE, ACCT, INADES, AMREF) has the capacity to impose a model of service delivery to its recipients. This situation will assure for quality not easily met in small cooperative ventures. (It also is capable of becoming an example of standards to aim for in any national project to be undertaken.) In instances of bilateral cooperation, the outcome can be limited by the availability of human/financial resources. When funding ceases, especially in the context involving aid agencies and developing countries (North-South cooperation), the possibility of continuity is often not easily resolved. In most cases, the level of support is reduced and often requires political commitment at the highest level for maintenance to be restored. The development of distance education in several African countries through bilateral cooperation is often beset with snags in respect of maintenance of programmes. These and other national endeavours often look abroad for further international support, a situation which the UNESCO Africa Priority programme has identified as worthy of support of the kind that encourages more of South-South cooperation (7).

**Essential ingridients for types of cooperation**

At all levels of cooperation, respect and trust must be shared by the participants for each other's involvement. Given that discussion of the project would have been identified and agreed upon, the intellectual commitment and capability within the partnership would also have been assessed. An interest in the same objective often brings participants closer in their working relationship in the same way that cultural affinity does in North-North and

South-South examples of cooperation. Information processing in this context is likely to be easier to manage in the SADCC, ERASMUS, EDEN contexts than in situations involving COL, ACCT, ICDE, given the breadth of differences in culture, political persuasions, professional skills and practice, and level of economic development.

The ability to combine technological and professional skills in such situations can assist in overcoming other administrative encumbrances. This often evolves from discussion of the issues in the search for solutions. Any type of cooperation, bilateral or multilateral, which does not bring benefits or satisfaction to its participants can be deemed to have failed. Political and financial considerations too may have a part to play in the success or failure of a project but these can be subsidiary to the protagonists themselves involved in the mechanics of working towards a shared goal.

**Types of cooperation**

Only examples of multilateral cooperation are dealt with here, because they bring out the idealistic, political and economic notions of cooperation on a grander scale than in bilateral situations. Success or failure as outcomes of such ventures reflect the extent to which the interplay of expertise, financial resources and political commitment have made their contribution. Ultimately, it is in the outcome of a shared objective,

whether in the case where resources and expertise are shared (as in COL, ICDL, ACCT, SADCC, AAOU)

or, in the context of an agency devoted to promoting cooperation multilaterally (as in UNESCO, ICDE, COL, ICDL, ACCT, AADE, SADCC)

or in training (North-South or South-South) to ensure for continuity of skills (as in UNESCO, COL, ACCT, ICDE, AADE, DLASA, SADCC, AAOU, INADES)

that success is engendered.

**Outcomes of cooperation**

Given the economic state of most African countries, multilateral cooperation should, in my view, deal with issues of mass appeal: those which will assist in providing either the confidence in people to enable them to improve their life styles or introduce the structures which will enable local enterprise to provide the confidence they need to develop from within. It has been demonstrated within the African context that this can occur, as in North-South and South-South collaborative contexts.

Distance education has mass appeal qualities and commends itself, as we have seen, as a qualitative, economic mode through which knowledge is transmitted. It seems reasonable, therefore, to advocate more of it in promoting a rapid advance whereby nation states become less dependent on others for a basic style of living.

In my view, there are two international agencies, AMREF and INADES-Formation, operating in Africa whose work seems to have a wide appeal within the continent, although the potential for an even greater appeal exists. These organisations achieve economies of scale which the distance teaching method they follow offers and also reveal how subjects which have grass roots appeal in several countries could aid development and enhance the skills and knowledge of the masses. AMREF and INADES have in this context received an appeal for courses in primary health care and basic agriculture respectively, which could set the pattern for aspects of development which have political, social and economic dimensions beyond the bilateral cooperative ventures.

An interesting observation is that these two organisations are involved in non-formal education programmes, whereby training/knowledge is passed on in a way that it affects the lives of large groups of people. It is direct and the results of the transmission of such knowledge is immediate. The outcome is that such informed groups of people can, therefore, live a better and improved lifestyle. It is evident also that the programmes succeed without the compulsory need for all participants to be literate. Within the social and economic contexts of these people, the programmes are transforming their lives directly and quickly.

These examples, at one extreme, are gaining ground within Africa in a way in which COL and ACCT have the potential of achieving similar or even better results in the formal education sector. Emphasis on formal education alone had led to several examples of bilateral cooperation spanning several decades which have, without other structures in place, led to national frustration and economic decline (8). International cooperation of a multilateral nature, which promotes and encourages the spread of mass education and has mass appeal, can only encourage rapid growth in the development in Africa. The distance teaching mode has demonstrated how effective it can be whatever the educational level of the participants. Through multilateral international cooperation it can multiply its capacity to foster growth and development within Africa.

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Acronyms explained

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|---|---|
| EADTU | European Association of Distance Teaching Universities |
| EDEN | European Distance Education Network |
| ERASMUS | European Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students |
| SATURN | |
| SADCC | Southern Africa Development Coordination Conference |
| NEIDA | Network of Educational Innovation for Development in Africa |
| AADE | African Association of Distance Education |
| COL | Commonwealth of Learning |
| ICDE | International Council for Distance Education |
| ICDL | International Centre for Distance Learning |
| ACCT | Agence de Coopération Culturelle et Technique |
| AMREF | African Medical & Research Foundation |
| INADES | Institut Africain pour le Développement Economique et Social |
| USAID | United States Agency for International Development |
| ODA | Overseas Development Administration |
| SIDA | Swedish International Development Agency |
| DLASA | Distance Learning Association of Southern Africa |
| CIDA | Canadian International Development Agency |
| AAOU | Asian Association of Open Universities |
| UNESCO | United Nation Education Scientific and Cultural Organisation |